

# Hispanic Membership Rising – Phi Theta Kappa Turns 90



by Marilyn Gilroy

**The** phrase “getting better with age” is one that could easily be applied to Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) International Honor Society. Having just celebrated its 90th anniversary, PTK is now the largest honor society in American higher education, with 1,250 chapters on two-year campuses in all 50 states, and in countries and territories throughout the world. More than two million students have been inducted since its founding, with approximately 100,000 students inducted annually. Those numbers also include a growing contingent of Hispanic students who are advancing to leadership positions within the various chapters and at the national level.

“Phi Theta Kappa really helped me gain confidence in myself and achieve a higher level of success,” said Arthur Vargas, who, in 2006, became the first Mexican-American president of Phi Theta Kappa International. Prior to that, he was the PTK Texas regional president. Vargas is currently attending St. Mary’s University on a PTK scholarship.

Phi Theta Kappa has been recognizing student scholars such as Vargas since 1918. It was established by eight presidents of Missouri’s two-year colleges for women who decided to form an honor society with common standards based on Phi Beta Kappa, the honorary society of four-year colleges. The following year, the organization held its first convention, at Stephens College in Columbia, Miss. In 1924, PTK changed its constitution to allow chapters at coeducational and all-male schools.

The growth in institutional membership has been steady, with new chapters joining the Phi Theta Kappa roster each year. In 2008, chapters were started at Bladen Community College in North Carolina and Mississippi Delta Community College. Last October, 159 students at College of the Desert in California were inducted as charter members.

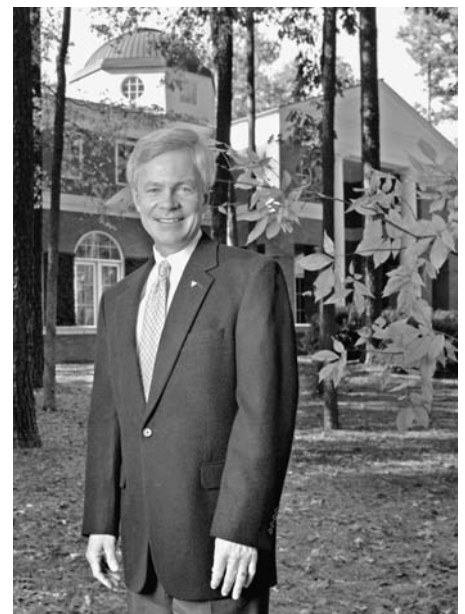
To be eligible for membership, a student must complete a minimum of 12 hours of associate degree coursework and earn a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Students must maintain a high academic standing throughout their enrollment in the two-year college, which usually means a 3.25 GPA.

The average age of a new member is 29, but in general, the age of members ranges from 18 to 80. One of the most senior members of PTK in recent years was Nola Ochs, who attended Dodge City Community College (DCCC) and went on to receive a bachelor’s degree at age 95 in 2007. While at DCCC, Ochs joined the college’s Phi Theta Kappa Chapter.

“Nola knew Phi Theta Kappa was an important organization on campus, so she wanted to accept membership,” said Fransiska Durant, chapter advisor at that time.

Both part-time and full-time students are eligible for membership, but the average Phi Theta Kappa is enrolled full time with a GPA of 3.8. The most popular major for Phi Theta Kappans is nursing, followed closely by education and business.

However, these statistics do not reveal the true



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impact and significance of this organization on campuses and communities.

### Scholarship Plus Service

Service, leadership and scholarship are the three hallmarks of Phi Theta Kappa. To fulfill the service mandate, members are involved in a wide range of community projects that include raising money to fight cancer, working with at-risk teens, providing support services to elderly citizens, and finding homes for abandoned pets.

"Phi Theta Kappa subscribes to the idea that acquiring knowledge is a responsibility and a gift – a gift to be shared to improve the quality of life of those we serve," said Rod Risley, PTK's executive director. "Our belief is that each member has the responsibility to learn and serve."

For the 2008-10 period, the PTK International Service Program is working in partnership with the Keep America Beautiful campaign by conducting Operation Green: Improving Our Communities. Members are encouraged to work in their communities to improve cleanliness through litter prevention and waste reduction.

To this end, chapters have taken to their campuses and nearby environs to tackle litter and graffiti, collecting pounds of debris but also cleaning up blighted sites by planting trees and flowers. Danville Area Community College in Illinois hosted a recycling collection for electronics that amassed five trailer truckloads of old computers and television sets.

On the Coffeyville Community College campus in Kansas, members planted 12 trees in Memorial Hall lot. The group also painted a house in town as part of its local "Paint the Town" project.

At North Lake College in Texas, part of the Dallas Community College system, the chapter mounted a "Rock the Green" program by collecting cigarette butts and placing anti-litter signs on campus. As part of its Happy Dumpster program, members went out in the community and "graded" local business dumpsters.

"We gave them information on how they can take a few simple steps to make the grades on their dumpsters better," said Vicki Riley who presided over the chapter's Keep America Beautiful Special Events. "They also learned by simply closing the lids to the dumpsters they could reduce a ton of litter in our city."

### Hispanics Make Their Mark

As the number of Hispanics enrolled in community colleges has risen, so has their representation in Phi Theta Kappa. They have made their mark on the organization and been lauded for achievements through scholarships and leadership awards.

Viviana Alcazar, who attended Canada Community College (Calif.) and went on to graduate from Stanford University in 2007, received a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Scholarship for transfer students. A native of México, Alcazar discovered that she loved studying literature because it provides links that cross borders and connect cultures with a com-



Student Arthur Vargas, first Mexican-American president of PTK International

mon experience. She says she thrived in the community college environment, where she found professors who encouraged her and where joining Phi Theta Kappa supported her intellectualism.

"Phi Theta Kappa recognized, encouraged and supported my search for academic excellence," she said. "It offered an environment that embraced the exchange of ideas, and at the same time created a sense of fellowship among its members."

Alcazar's feelings are echoed by fellow Cooke scholarship recipient Raúl Magdaleno, who over-

came a bleak childhood, living for a time in a homeless shelter, to attend Mountain View College, where he joined Phi Theta Kappa. From there, he used his PTK scholarship to attend Southern Methodist University. He currently works in the office of diversity and community outreach at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts.

"Phi Theta Kappa and my community college served as a motivation and raised my self-confidence," he said. "I knew I could do anything I set my mind to."

Hispanics also have joined the roster of individuals receiving PTK's Distinguished Alumna Award. In 2008, Florida Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the first Hispanic woman and first Cuban-American elected to the U.S. Congress, was selected for the award. Past recipients have included journalist Jim Lehrer, former U.N. Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, industrialist H. Ross Perot and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mirta Ojito, who came to the United States from Cuba at age 16.

Ros-Lehtinen was chosen for her efforts to improve our quality of life. The award cited her support of legislation regarding environmental development and restoration to protect coastlines from offshore drilling, to preserve Florida's threatened coral reefs and to raise awareness of the need for environmental responsibility. She also has lobbied for breast cancer funding, and has been a strong advocate of programs that address violence against women.

Ros-Lehtinen joined Phi Theta Kappa in 1972, when she was a student at Miami-Dade Community College. She believes that higher education has the power to transform lives, and she promotes this idea whenever she speaks to groups of students.

"I make doubly sure that students understand that a good education is everything in life and can make the difference between a life of successes or regrets," she said.

### Visionary Leadership

For many years, the driving force behind Phi Theta Kappa has been Rod Risley, executive director since 1985. At that time, PTK had a staff of five, an annual operating budget of \$500,000, and 550 chapters in 48 states. Today the staff numbers nearly 70, and the operating budget exceeds \$8 million.

Risley, himself a community college graduate, has made procurement of scholarship funds for Phi



**PTK member  
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Theta Kappa members a priority. In 1977, only four senior institutions designated transfer scholarships to Phi Theta Kappa members. Today 665 senior institutions designate \$36 million in transfer scholarships to members.

Risley helped establish the All-USA Academic Team for Community Colleges, a program that recognizes community college students nationally for academic and leadership accomplishments. In 1994, Phi Theta Kappa launched the All-State Academic Team program as a component of the All-USA Team. Thirty-four states hold All-State Team Recognition Programs, which have brought statewide media attention to community colleges and \$41 million in

senior institution scholarships for team members.

Risley also helped conceive and launch Phi Theta Kappa's internationally acclaimed Leadership Development Studies Program. As an acknowledgment of his visionary leadership, he was presented with the 2008 National Leadership Award from the American Association of Community Colleges.

Helping students achieve their degrees is Risley's passion. One of his latest efforts has been to lead Phi Theta Kappa in the development of CollegeFish.org, a Web-based platform designed to help community college students plan for transfer to a senior college. The platform matches four-year colleges to a student's profile to provide a good academic "fit" based

on the transfer student's interests, abilities, program of study and financial needs. The site provides an extensive database of scholarships designated for community college transfer students.

"We have the responsibility of raising the aspirations of all students to complete a baccalaureate degree, and so we are providing students a tool to accomplish that aim," said Risley.

The Web site is especially useful because, as Risley notes, community college students often juggle family and job commitments and have limited time for research. Thus, the single point of information will be enormously helpful in providing a "one-point" source of information on transfer and scholarships.

"Community college students, many of them first-generation college students, generally do not know the how, what, where and when with regard to planning for transfer and completion of a baccalaureate degree," said Risley. "These students wait until it is too late to begin the planning process and are often locked out of admissions, scholarships, financial aid and housing opportunities at senior institutions."

The Web site will contain articles to help students understand the terminology associated with planning for transfer, the sequence of tasks to be completed for transfer, a personal automatic calendar noting deadlines and profiles on more than 2,000 senior colleges.

"One of our major goals is to introduce students to senior colleges that are not only interested in recruiting them, but who are also eager to ensure their transfer success," said Risley.



